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AUTHOR Hains, Ann Higgins; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the roles of educational agencies, teachers, parents, and the children themselves in ensuring successful transitions from special education preschools to mainstreamed kindergarten placements. Factors determining classroom placements for the child include chronological age, results of school readiness and developmental screening tests, rates of inappropriate child behavior and teacher attention, and the ability to meet demands of the future classroom environment. Parents choosing to actively participate as partners and teachers can help prepare the child for transition, help maintain and generalize some of the critical skills necessary for a successful transition, and serve as a bridge between the two programs. The sending teacher can become familiar with the curriculum and routines of potential receiving programs and focus on teaching the skills that the child must demonstrate upon kindergarten entry. The receiving teacher may need to evaluate traditional kindergarten routines, teach academic support skills in addition to academic content, and establish new communication patterns with parents. Educational agencies should promote interagency coordination and communication. Thirty-nine references are provided. (VW)

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Planning School Transitions: Family and Professional Collaboration

Ann Higgins Hains

University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee

Susan A. Fowler and Lynette K. Chandler

University of Kansas

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Ann Higgins Hains, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Exceptional Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201.

Susan A. Fowler, Ph.D., is an Associate Scientist in the Bureau of Child Research, at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045.

Lynette K. Chandler, M.A., is a Research Assistant in the Department of Human Development and Family Life, at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045.

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Abstract

The following paper addresses some of the key issues involved in planning transitions for young handicapped children who are moving from special education preschool programs to mainstreamed kindergarten placements. The roles of the child, family, sending and receiving teachers, and educational agencies are discussed. Activities to encourage successful transitions and to support collaborative planning efforts are suggested.

The issue of transitions--the movement of children from one service program to another--is gaining increasing interest in the field of early childhood special education (Spillman & Lutz, 1985; Thurlow, O'Sullivan, & Ysseldyke, 1986, Uphoff & Gilmore, 1985). The goal of early intervention is not only to teach children developmental skills, but also to instruct children in the skills necessary to function in less-restrictive future environments (Cook & Armbruster, 1983; Vincent, Salisbury, Walter, Brown, Gruenewald, & Powers, 1980). Early childhood special educators have aptly demonstrated that they can teach a range of new skills to young children with handicapping conditions (Rowbury, 1982) and that they can change many behaviors that compete or interfere with learning, socialization and communication (LeBlanc, 1982). Yet, teachers recognize that some skills and behavior changes do not transfer or maintain in new school settings consistently (Fowler, 1982). The research literature presents many examples of children who performed quite successfully and independently in specialized classrooms, yet failed to generalize critical skills to a regular or less-restrictive classrooms (Carden-Smith & Fowler, 1983; Walker & Buckley, 1976; Stokes & Baer, 1977). Many of these children subsequently were placed back into segregated, specialized classrooms. To ensure that children adjust to their new program successfully, educators should begin to train children specifically for transitions (Cook & Armbruster, 1983; Vincent, et al., 1980).

The transition of young handicapped children between programs

can be stressful for children, their families and their teaching staffs (Turnbull & Winton, 1983; Winton & Turnbull, 1981). Transitions involve many changes. For children such changes may include: Making new friends, learning new skills, generalizing old skills to new situations, acquiring new routines, and exploring new environments (Fowler, 1982). For families, such changes may include: Adjusting schedules, finding new services, attending additional conferences, setting more goals, re-educating school personnel about their child's special needs, and risking their child's and their own failure (Johnson, Chandler, Kerns, & Fowler, 1986; Winton, Turnbull, & Blacher, 1984). For school personnel such changes may include: Revising curricula to facilitate the children's adjustment into the new classroom before and after the transition, developing communication between professionals in the children's former school placement and the new placement, involving parents in making placement decisions and facilitating adjustments between school and home.

Because mainstreamed programs often place increased demands on children and their families, transitions into mainstreamed settings from specialized settings are likely to produce even more stress than transitions to other specialized programs (Turnbull & Winton, 1983). Nevertheless, a positive experience with initial transitions, particularly the transition to mainstreamed programs, may serve as a prototype for all future transitions between schools and agencies (Ziegler, 1985).

The factors contributing to the success or failure of transitions are multiple and complex. They involve not only the child, but the quality of the sending and receiving programs, as well as the behaviors, expectations and support of the teachers, the family and the community. This paper addresses some of the key issues involved in transitions from special education preschool programs to mainstreamed kindergarten classrooms. The roles that the child, family, teachers, and educational agencies may play in successful transitions will be explored.

The Child's Role in Successful Transitions

Future classroom placements for children are likely to be determined by a number of factors. Chronological age (e.g., 5- or 6-years-old) often dictates that children must move on from preschool to elementary school programs. Recently, the results of a nation-wide survey of early childhood special education programs revealed that the most common criteria for exit from a program was chronological age (Thurlow, Lehr, & Ysseldyke, 1987). However, more comprehensive information typically is needed to determine the most appropriate placement, and kindergarten entry decisions often are based on formal tests which document that the child with special needs is ready for kindergarten (Meisels, 1986).

A major debate currently occurring in early childhood education surrounds the issue of using school readiness and developmental screening tests for assigning children to particular programs. Two popular school readiness tests are the Gesell School Readiness Test

(Ilg & Ames, 1972) and the Metropolitan Readiness Tests (Nurss & McGauvran, 1976). Controversy exists as to the purpose of these tests. Some researchers assert that they are intended to assess the children's "capacity to simultaneously learn and cope with the school environment" (The Gesell Institute Responds, 1987, p. 7). Other researchers claim that these school readiness tests (a) can only display children's present level of academic functioning and general cognitive knowledge, (b) give little information about children's potential for succeeding in school, and (c) should not be used for prediction or placement (Meisels, 1987; Wood, Powell, & Knight, 1984).

On the other hand, developmental screening tests such as the McCarthy Screening Test (McCarthy, 1978) and the Early Screening Inventory (Meisels & Wiske, 1983) are constructed to predict children who would be at risk in regular classroom placements. Unlike the readiness tests, the screening tests have predictive validity, developmental content, and normative standardization (Meisels, 1986). Interestingly, other researchers caution the use of either school readiness or developmental screening results for young children with handicaps in predicting adjustment to future placements because they have found that "fairly dramatic changes in screening and assessment outcomes occur from one year to the next" (Thurlow, O'Sullivan and Ysseldyke, 1986, p. 94).

Furthermore, while screening and readiness tests may indicate children's proficiency at academic tasks, the results may not

accurately predict children's abilities to function in kindergarten. Additional prerequisite skills such as social interaction, attending, and direction following often are not assessed by readiness or screening tests. Research indicates that these academic support skills are important for academic achievement (Anderson-Inman, Paine, & Deutchman, 1984, Cobb & Hops, 1973; Walter & Vincent, 1982). For example, the behavioral requirements of kindergarten may be an equally important consideration when planning for successful transitions. Children's performance is often influenced by motivational and behavioral factors.

Two behaviors reflective of the behavioral adjustment of children with special needs include rates of inappropriate child behavior and teacher attention. Inappropriate behavior typically has been considered an index of children's adjustment in regular classrooms (e.g., Drabman & Lahey, 1974; Walker & Buckley, 1972; Walker & Hops, 1976). Certain topographies and rates of inappropriate behavior usually prevent children from engaging in activities and interactions available to other children. Rates significantly higher than those exhibited by other members of the class may lead to removal from the class or to severe restrictions in both social and learning opportunities (Carden-Smith & Fowler, 1983).

Similarly, the rate and manner in which teachers respond to mainstreamed children, relative to other children, may function as an index of the mainstreamed children's adjustment and instructional

integration. Again, the placement of children who receive significantly higher rates of teacher attention may be jeopardized because teachers may not be able to maintain high rates of attention and continue to manage their other classroom responsibilities effectively. Research suggests that children who do not disrupt classroom routines and activities and who do not require excessive teacher attention are more likely to successfully remain in the regular classroom than are children who interfere with class management or instruction and require extra attention (e.g., Carden-Smith & Fowler, 1983; Walker, Hops & Johnson, 1975).

In addition to the considerations of the children's present developmental skill level and behavioral repertoire, the demands of the future environment may need to be examined. For example, the kindergarten classroom may place a number of new setting demands on children. The changes in the number of teachers, number of classmates, and size of the school may present challenges regarding classroom rules and routines (Rosenkoetter & Fowler, 1986). These experiences may have been encountered in the preschool classroom, but some may be new. The child's ability to face these challenges will determine to a great extent whether or not children can adjust and succeed in the kindergarten placement.

The Parent's Role in Successful Transitions

Transitions from a special preschool program to a regular kindergarten classroom involve change for the family as well as for the child. Change requires the family to alter familiar routines

and begin initiating new behaviors, experiences, and expectations. For the family, changes might include adjusting schedules, meeting new teachers and special service staff, relinquishing the frequent contact with the preschool, evaluating once again their child's abilities and skills, advocating for special services, helping to set Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, and risking their child's failure in a new program.

The effects of change during transition periods may be lessened if parents are prepared for the new situation and are allowed to participate and plan the transition process. Early childhood education programs that plan for transitions may decide to include a family component to help parents identify: (a) Their needs and concerns, (b) their level of involvement in their child's transition, (c) their need for information or strategies that might be useful to them in making decisions regarding their child's new program (Chandler, Fowler, & Lubeck, in press).

For special preschool programs that include a family component, the importance of recognizing and responding to individual differences among families must not be overlooked. In a recent study, interviews with families whose children had experienced a recent transition from an early childhood special education program to a public school program indicated that families: (a) May experience stress during transitions (b) have different experiences in transitions, (c) have varying needs, (d) differ in their level of satisfaction and level of involvement during transitions, and (e)

vary in the extent to which they collaborate with professionals (Johnson, Chandler, Kerns, & Fowler, 1986).

A parent may participate in several roles during the child's transition from preschool to kindergarten. Parents may participate as teachers, partners, decision-makers, and/or advocates (Shearer & Shearer, 1977). Parents are teachers when they help their child practice at home some of the skills that their child acquired in preschool. Parents develop the role of partner through open communication with professionals about their child's needs and the family's needs. Parents act as decision-makers when they identify and select IEP goals for their child or choose a school placement among various placement options. Professionals can assist parents in their role of decision-maker by helping them identify their needs, values, and expectations regarding their child's education. Then families and professionals can make collaborative decisions regarding the child's transition which reflect the concerns of everyone involved. Parents become advocates when they communicate with others about their child and the family, and participate in making decisions. They also serve as advocates for the educational program by lending support and assistance to the program when necessary. For example, parents may advocate for funding of programs by contacting local and state government officials.

The roles that parents might adopt in the transition process are many and varied, and not all parents will or can adopt each role. Parents should be encouraged to select the type and level of

involvement they feel is most appropriate, recognizing that their participation may change over time. The goal of a family component should be to help families participate well at their chosen level, not more.

Families tend to be an untapped source of support in transition programming. When parents choose to serve as partners and teachers, they can help prepare the child for transition, help maintain and generalize some of the critical skills necessary for a successful transition, and serve as a bridge between the two programs. For example, parents can visit the new program with their child, helping the child become familiar with new teachers, the classroom, and the school. They can discuss with their child the changes their child will experience, possibly reducing some of the anxieties and fears the child may have. They can bridge the gap between old and new programs for their child by arranging visits with old preschool friends and teachers. Likewise, they can arrange after school activities or visits with children from the new program to help make new friends. Parents also may work with their child in a variety of settings such as at home, during preschool, and in other recreational or therapeutic settings. Parents may help their child learn many types of skills. For example, parents can help their child learn to take turns, play or work in a group, follow directions, ask for assistance or support, follow routines and rules, play independently, attend to tasks, complete self-help skills, etc.

Families may experience short and long range benefits by learning to deal with change effectively and by learning to plan for educational services while their child is young. In addition, families may serve as a valuable resource for the child and to the programs, during times of transition.

The Teacher's Role in Successful Transitions

Teachers, along with parents, interact with the child daily. Teacher attitudes, instructional priorities, and communications with parents and other members participating in the transition team may shape the child's transition. The roles of the sending and receiving teacher will be discussed separately.

Sending Teacher. An important role for the sending teacher is educator. Teachers in early childhood special education classrooms are faced with the problems of first, "determining what skills the children are expected to display in kindergarten" and second, "demonstrating that the children are, in fact, ready to enter kindergarten" (Vincent et al., 1980, p. 307). These problems may be further complicated by recent research findings which suggest that escalating standards in many kindergartens, where the kindergarten expectations look like past expectations for first grade, may contribute to the difficulty in indentification of prerequisite skills (May & Welch, 1986).

Yet, if the goal of early childhood special education is to provide programs in which children acquire the skills necessary to function in mainstreamed settings, then the "skills and behaviors

deemed essential for success in kindergarten must be identified, specified, and carefully taught" (Cook & Armbruster, 1983, p. 93). An ideal way to determine readiness skills would be to identify the children's receiving teachers a year in advance, visit the classrooms and formulate the transition curriculum for preschool based on the prerequisites for those programs. Specifically, the preschool curriculum would not teach kindergarten or first grade skills, but rather it would focus on the skills the children must demonstrate upon kindergarten entry.

From a practical standpoint, early identification of the receiving teacher may be easy only in small districts where children attend neighborhood schools. In large school districts, pinpointing the teacher most likely to receive the child may not be possible. In addition, identification may be impeded by teacher turnover through transfers, resignations or retirements. Nevertheless, in preparation for the transition process, the preschool teacher's familiarity with the curriculum and routines of potential receiving programs is important for transition planning (Fowler, 1982). This may be accomplished by observing several classrooms during school hours, visiting with the teachers regarding expectations for entry into their programs, and scanning any curricula available from the programs. Administrators may need to increase release time for teachers for transition planning.

Once the prerequisite skills are identified, the preschool teacher and parents may begin planning to prepare the child for the

transition. The teacher may still retain a primary role as educator, but also may assume the role of facilitator. Through the IEP, the teacher may facilitate collaborative planning for transitions by acknowledging the roles that the parents choose to play and the level of parent involvement in the discussion of annual goals as well as short term objectives. By encouraging open communication about the child's needs and the family's needs, the teacher can support the parents in their role as partner. The teacher may also serve as facilitator in the transition process when explaining procedures to parents, encouraging their efforts to teach the child and plan for the future; and providing them with information about their child's school progress.

The sending teacher may assume primary responsibility for preparing the child for the next environment. After the teacher has examined the prerequisites and expectations for kindergarten and with the parents identified IEP goals, activities may be incorporated to teach the skills. Strategies for curriculum adjustments at the preschool level have been outlined by Fowler (1982), Vincent et al. (1980), and Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, (1979). These suggestions include (a) gradually approximating the format of the kindergarten classroom by varying "class size, adult-child ration, duration of activities, and opportunity to work in child-guided activities" (Vincent et al. 1980, p. 325), and (b) altering preschool teachers' interaction patterns to be more like kindergarten by manipulating amount of

attention, reinforcement, and direct instruction. The teacher acts as educator and decision-maker when selecting activities for IEP goals including transition preparation.

Another role the sending teacher might adopt is that of liason. The preschool teacher may wish to first inquire with the receiving professionals about the information that might be useful to them and when the information would be needed. Some receiving teachers may want specific information while others may wish to form their own impressions of the child prior to reading the sending teacher's report. If possible (and with parent permission), the sending teacher may wish to communicate with the receiving teacher about the child's progress (a) prior to the transition so that the child's previous performance and instructional needs can be shared, (e.g., suggestions of teaching strategies which have been effective in the past might be shared, and equipment and physical adaptations used by the child may need to be demonstrated) and (b) after the transition, so that information can be exchanged regarding the child, concern can be expressed regarding problems that may arise and recommendations for their solution, and enthusiastic support can be offered for the child's (and teacher's) success (Fowler, 1982). In summary, the sending teacher can be an important facilitator for children's transitions.

Receiving Teacher. The receiving teacher's role as educator is an important one. Walker and his colleagues have documented the importance that teacher attitude and satisfaction may play in a

handicapped child's successful integration (cf. Walker & Rankin, 1983). Research by Dwigging (1981) indicates that teachers often do not adjust their behavioral standards to accommodate the special needs of a child with handicaps. This lack of adjustment increases the possibility that children could be mainstreamed into classrooms with standards they could not possibly meet, thus creating undesirable stress for the child, teacher, and family. As such, assessment of teacher satisfaction and attitude toward the child's progress may be critical to determining the success of the child's placement and potential stress resulting from the placement. When supervisors or administrators survey teacher satisfaction with child progress, additional support services or technical assistance necessary for the child and teacher can be identified, and information for sending teachers could be gathered as preventive measures for other children making similar transitions in the future.

In the classroom, the teacher's role as educator may require flexibility. Traditional kindergarten routines may need to be evaluated in terms of the entry skills of new students. Academic support skills may need to be taught specifically in addition to academic content. During group instruction, appropriate behaviors may need to be defined and be rewarded when they occur. Individual adaptations may be necessary if a child is having difficulty adjusting to the new classroom. Both the sending teacher and receiving teacher may need to realize that some skills mastered in

preschool may not readily generalize to the new classroom (Walker & Buckley, 1972; Wildman & Wildman, 1975).

Like the sending teacher, the receiving teacher may also assume the role of facilitator in the transition process. Parents may have had daily interaction with preschool staff, and this amount of contact may be unrealistic for kindergarten teachers who are responsible for sixty children. Receiving teachers may need to establish new communication patterns with parents so that parents know how their child is adjusting to the new program as well as when and how to contact the school.

The Educational Agency's Role in Successful Transitions

The system of early childhood services for handicapped children is often characterized by lack of interagency coordination. When children leave preschool and enter kindergarten, they may be moving from one service agency to another agency (often the public school system) or from one program to another program within an agency (e.g., a public school early childhood special education program to a regular kindergarten classroom). Communication between the sending and receiving agencies or programs may be important for ensuring that the child's educational plan continues without serious interruption, that appropriate services are provided and that the child and family are satisfied with the change in program. Currently, little evidence is available to document the "smoothness" of transitions and child, family or teacher satisfaction.

The greatest cost of collaborative planning may be the time

required by the staff of one agency or program to plan cooperatively with the staff of another in order to share information and develop mutually agreeable solutions to potential transition problems. Formal lines of communication may need to be established between the two agencies or programs to create an organized and efficient transition. In addition to establishing communication between agencies, communication within each agency or program may need to be designated since communication within agencies is often both hierarchical and lateral. For example, the staff member coordinating kindergarten transitions in a school district may send information through a hierarchy of staff, communicating first with the special services director and/or the school principal, who in turn communicate with the classroom teacher and support staff. Communication may also occur in a lateral fashion, when information is shared among teachers and therapists. For instance, the teacher may send information to the speech therapist, the resource room teacher, librarian and gym teacher. This intra-agency communication may ensure that information which has been received from the sending agency reaches the staff members who are planning the child's next program.

In summary, transitions are complex and involve many individuals. The family, preschool staff, and elementary school staff play vital roles in facilitating and ensuring the successful adjustment of children in less-restrictive settings. They are partners in the process. Lack of communication between agencies,

sending and receiving teachers, and families may jeopardize the years of careful training and education provided to the children in early childhood special education programs. To ensure that the gains acquired through early programming are maintained, educators must begin transition planning. The efficacy of early childhood special education programs may depend on this next step.

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